

Swarthmore College

Works

Art & Art History Faculty Works

Art & Art History

6-1-1986

The Case Of The Seven Sleepers: An Art History Detective Story

Michael Watt Cothren

Swarthmore College, mcothre1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-art>



Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Michael Watt Cothren. (1986). "The Case Of The Seven Sleepers: An Art History Detective Story". *Swarthmore College Bulletin*. Volume 83, Issue 5. 41-47.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-art/108>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art & Art History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

The Case of the Seven Sleepers

An art history detective story

"Praeteritorum enim recordatio futurorum est exhibitio."

—Sugerius of Saint-Denis

The cathedral church of the Norman capital of Rouen (about 80 miles northwest of Paris) was one of the most impressive buildings of the Middle Ages. Constructed in the fashionably soaring High Gothic style after a fire in 1200 seriously damaged the previous, Romanesque, church on the site, the new cathedral was filled with stained glass windows executed by some of the most important artists of the time. Glass painting was the major medium of painting in this period. The most important pictorial fields were created by the Gothic architect who opened vast spaces between supports so that walls could be replaced with broad curtains of colored glass depicting ecclesiastical subjects of hagiographic, theological, occasionally moralizing, often political, significance.

These glittering, colorful compositions painted with filtered light were meant to take our breath away, to dominate our experience of a miraculously soaring, unified architectural space, to imbue us as they imbued that space with a sense of wonder and excitement. The idea that sparkling and multicolored light can replace walls to enclose lofty architectural spaces is still overwhelming, even to jaded 20th-century viewers to whom space ships and skyscrapers are an everyday experience.

Yet even if our visual responses ally us with our 13th-century precursors when we stand before the windows of Gothic

Michael W. Cothren spent 1985-86 on sabbatical as a Getty Humanities Fellow studying the stained glass of Beauvais Cathedral in northern France.



Figure 1: A glass portrait of Abbot Sugerius of Saint-Denis, the 12th-century patron saint of stained glass as an art form.

churches, many aspects of these translucent paintings—such as their symbolic meaning or the circumstances that called for their creation—remain obscure to the modern viewer unfamiliar with medieval theological speculations or political power struggles.

The windows of many Gothic churches, however, present even more basic problems to the modern viewer. The ravages of time have often constructed barriers between us and the original glazings by reducing them to a mere fragment of their original appearance, and thus hindering our aesthetic and emotional, as well as our symbolic and historical, understanding. The windows of Rouen Cathedral are a case in point.

Some of the stained glass painted for the nave aisle of Rouen was entrusted to a painter who is generally considered one of the greatest artists of the early 13th century, a real old master. He was a virtuoso in the use of overlapping to suggest three dimensional space, and he enveloped his figures in lusciously painted drapery that falls in elegant, long curves over sophisticated and graceful poses (Figure 1). He used glass of

unusually rich texture and color. He was able to infuse his figures with a variety of expressive modes through the careful manipulation of conventional facial types. Only our ignorance of his name has prevented him from holding the revered place he deserves within the history of art. Medievalists refer to him as the John the Baptist Master, naming him after his best known work, a window at Rouen which portrayed the life of Saint John the Baptist; it would be like calling Michelangelo the Sistine Ceiling Master.

But the work of the John the Baptist Master and his contemporaries in the nave of Rouen has not been well preserved; there are no whole windows. Portions of their work have actually been removed from Rouen. In fact, the best examples of the work of the John the Baptist Master are not even in France, but in American collections. Two exquisite panels are in the Raymond Pitcairn Collection, now housed in the Glencairn Museum of the Academy of the New Church, Bryn Athyn, Pa. Others are in the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Unlike the stained glass of the Cathedral of Chartres or the Sainte-Chapelle, where many windows are displayed reasonably intact or carefully restored within their original architectural context, an authentic appreciation of the windows of the nave aisle of Rouen entails some effort since they are no longer there. It requires the intermediation of a detective.

First, all the dispersed pieces in the United States and France must be tracked down. Then they must be examined closely to determine to what extent each has been distorted by modern alterations: Stained



Figure 2: The “Belle Verrière” of the chapel of Saint-Jean de la nef, Rouen Cathedral, has been altered substantially since the early 13th century.

glass in museums has often been “refreshed” during its trip through the art market. Only at this point can an attempt be made to piece together the meager fragments that have been gathered and try to assemble from them a whole window.

The detective work and reconstruction necessary to study the nave aisle windows of Rouen have occupied much of my research over the last few years. Here I have been asked to share the story of how it has been possible to reconstruct one of the John the Baptist Master’s windows—a window that told the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (see accompanying story, page 44).¹

First some historical background. The primary obstacle to the study of the early 13th-century windows of Rouen was erected in the late 13th century. Originally there were no chapels along the aisles of the cathedral as there are today. By the 1270s, however, the functional demands placed on this building had changed. There were not enough altars to fulfill contemporary liturgical needs, so the aisle walls were knocked down, and a series of chapels was built along both sides of the building, each with an altar where services could be said. Architectural styles changed rapidly during the 13th century, and the designs of the original aisle windows were hopelessly old-fashioned by the 1270s. The new architects who built the additional chapels replaced the simple, singular, early 13th-century lancets with up-to-date, larger, and greatly subdivided windows. Instead of one broad opening, the new windows were composed of four narrow ones (Figure 2).

Since the stained glass taken out of the old windows was too precious to discard, the decision was made to adapt it to fit the new multiple, but narrow, opening. The panels chosen for reuse were much transformed to fit their new home—butchered, we might say. Some were cut down, most were reshaped, turned on the bias, or patched up. Then they were plugged into the openings like a series of patches in a quilt. Little attempt, other than the addition of a new strip of decoration along the edge to form a border, seems to have been made to give any semblance of formal continuity, or to bind the battered relics into a coherent whole. There was even less concern for continuity in symbolic meaning. Episodes from the lives of various saints from several windows were randomly arranged, within a single lancet, as if subject were a matter of little significance. It is impossible to follow a narrative or discern a symbolic theme. Perhaps this was the first “museum installation” of medieval art.

Two such patchwork windows confront

the visitor to the Cathedral of Rouen today in two chapels of the north aisle of the nave. Together they contain the remnants of a dozen or so windows. As late as 1830, however, there were two comparable ensembles on the south side of the church. Their disappearance represents the first step in a journey that would lead some of this glass into American collections.

During the 19th century, it seems, the disorder of these hodge-podge windows at Rouen was even more bothersome than it is today. By the middle of the century it was determined that since these confused old windows detracted from the appearance of the venerable cathedral, they should be replaced with modern windows that would simulate the appearance of medieval windows. While tidier, neo-Gothic windows were made during the second half of the 19th century for this position on the south side of the nave, the displaced relics of medieval glass were moved for safekeeping to a first floor room in the northwest tower of the cathedral.²

It seems that most people forgot that the medieval panels had been placed in storage—most, but not all. From this not-so-safe depot panels began to leave for the art market. Four entered the New York collection of Henry C. Lawrence in 1918, from which they were sold in 1921 to the Worcester Art Museum and to Raymond Pitcairn. The panels had already left Rouen by 1911, when an inventory of the storeroom made by Jean Lafond, a renowned French specialist in medieval stained glass, reported many losses. In 1934 when Lafond returned to the storeroom, other panels had been smuggled out and sold, including two purchased by Raymond Pitcairn, one of which has recently entered The Cloisters Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 1934 Lafond discovered also that the panels that had remained in storage had not been cared for and were in deplorable condition. These battered fragments have now been moved to the French national storage facility at the Chateau of Champs-sur-Marne. A program currently is under way to return them to Rouen. The first product of this effort is a splendid modern window by a contemporary French glass painter named Sylvie Gaudin, which has recently been installed in a chapel of the choir of the cathedral. She has surrounded eight fragmentary early 13th-century panels with skillful and judicious modern variations on their medieval themes—a mixture of the medieval and the modern created in such a way that justice has been done to both.

My study of the Rouen nave aisle windows began with an examination of this group of panels—those in American collec-

tions and those that have been returned to Rouen in a modern "reliquary" window. While I was in Paris in 1982, on sabbatical leave from Swarthmore (supported by a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities) working on this and other projects, more fragments were discovered, fragments that had apparently been left in a storage crate and forgotten. There were partially preserved panels, small ensembles, and even individual pieces of glass which had presumably fallen from various larger fragments while the panels were in storage cases, and which must now be returned to them like pieces of a huge, still fragmentary, but enormously important, jigsaw puzzle. I discovered the existence of this glass by chance, noticing a photograph of several pieces while I was in a French Ministry of Culture office involved with other research.

A nervous few months of delicate diplomatic encounters followed before I was able to gain permission to examine these pieces and ascertain if they fit where they ought to fit in the reconstruction I had developed based on my study of the already known panels. Because many important panels of French medieval stained glass

made their way surreptitiously to the United States in the first half of the 20th century, American scholars often encounter suspicious government authorities when they seek special permission to study precious national treasures. In this case, however, I was fortunate to be supported by Catherine Brisac, a French art historian who specializes in the study of stained glass and who works in that capacity for the Ministry of Culture. With her aid I was able to convince government officials that I could help determine what to do with these fragments, and in return for my promise to file an inventory with the Ministry of Culture, was given formal permission to study them.

Like any good detective, with all this evidence gathered I now had to interpret it. The first step was to determine what the whole Seven Sleepers window originally looked like. There were eleven fragmentary panels and numerous single pieces of glass to work with, but the evidence they present is often confusing. Many panels have been marred by later restorations that mask their original appearance. These later additions must be eliminated and occasionally the authentic cores must be rearranged in order to unravel the tangled knots of the later

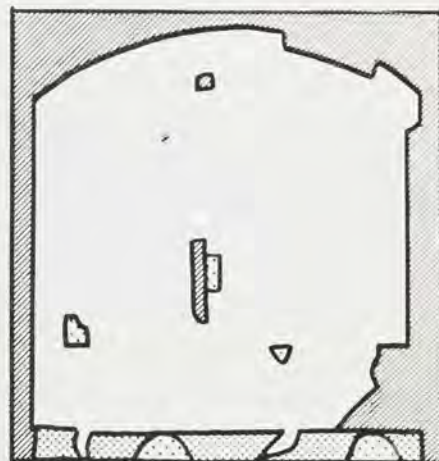


Figure 3: A reconstruction of the medieval core of a panel depicting messengers before the Emperor Theodosius from the Seven Sleepers window of Rouen Cathedral, now in the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. (1921-60).

The legend of "The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus"

The story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is set in a turbulent period of Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Decius. When seven of his noble retainers were converted to Christianity and refused to perform the requisite pagan sacrifices while the court was in Ephesus, the angered emperor chastised the seven when they were brought before him, but he released them and admonished them to practice penance in Ephesus until the court returned. Instead, the seven men sold their possessions, gave the proceeds to the poor, and retired into a cave where they could practice their religion without fear of persecution. One of them, named Malchus, was chosen to sneak regularly into Ephesus to buy food and listen for news of Decius's persecutions.

Eventually Decius and his court returned to Ephesus and learned of the continued Christian piety of the seven. Aware of the emperor's angry response to their steadfast faith, the seven faithful courtiers knelt in their cave and prayed to be delivered from his wrath. God answered their prayer by putting them into a deep sleep just as Decius's men closed the opening to their retreat with huge stones, sealing their fate as martyrs.

Many years passed and the existence of the cave behind the boulders was forgotten. The seven, however, continued to sleep uninterrupted. One day during the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius II, a wealthy shepherd, seeking stones to build an enclosure for his sheep, unknowingly uncovered the mouth of the cave in which the seven Christian nobles had been sleeping peacefully for almost two centuries. Awakening as if from a single night's sleep, Malchus left for Ephesus on his daily visit to buy food and seek news. Immediately upon his arrival he was struck by changes in his customary environment.

A cross was set up at the gate of the city. Inside he saw churches. Christian clergy walked freely on the streets. When he attempted to buy food with a by then ancient silver coin minted under Decius, Malchus was led before the bishop and prefect because the Ephesian merchants were suspicious about how he might have obtained such an antique treasure. Although at first skeptical, upon hearing his story both sacred and secular authorities followed Malchus to the cave to witness the survival of his six companions and glorify God for this wondrous miracle. The bishop and prefect sent messengers to inform the emperor Theodosius of what had transpired. Overjoyed by what he had heard, the curious emperor came in haste on horseback to Ephesus to venerate the seven, who, after talking with him, fell again into sleep.

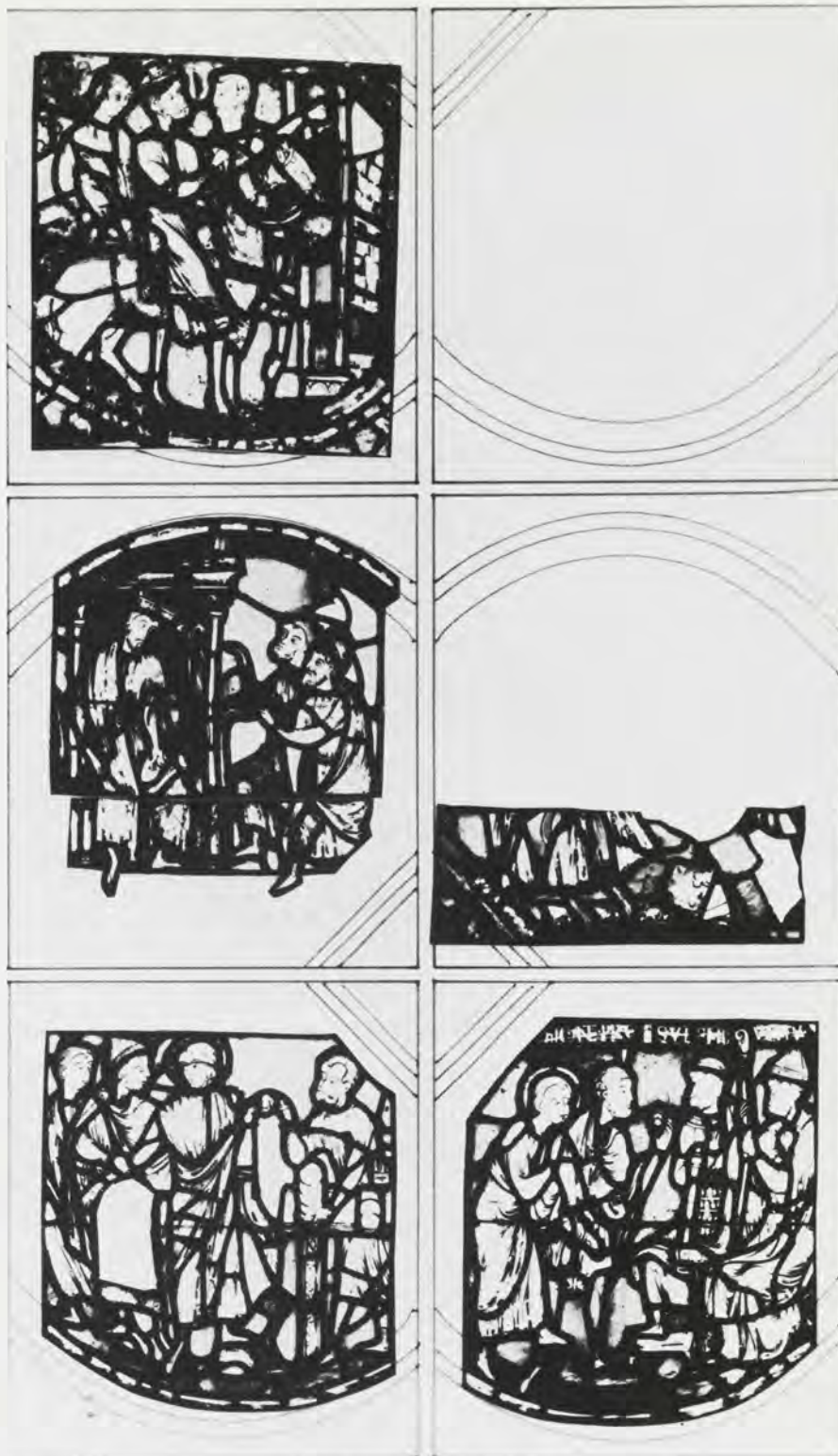


Figure 4: The author's reconstruction reveals the design and format of the six panels that made up the original Seven Sleepers window (registers 7-10) of Rouen Cathedral. The surviving incomplete panels, each depicting an episode in the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, fall into correct chronological order.

transformations which now hold these panels together.

An examination of the panel now in the Worcester Art Museum demonstrates how this step can be accomplished and what it reveals. In the diagram reproduced here (Figure 3), all the hatched areas are modern. An early 20th-century dealer added lattice mosaic ground to the top of the panel and white strips of beaded decoration to the sides, seeking to transform an irregular panel defined by curving fillets and ragged edges into a regular, and more marketable, rectangle. Apparently his theory was that an art-buying public accustomed to thinking about paintings as framed rectangles would be more likely to buy stained glass if it were also rectangular.

Once all this modern glass is removed, an early 13th-century core is exposed. A close look at this core reveals that for some reason the lower part of the scene has been shifted to the left. Once this strip is moved slightly to the right, the composition, though still incomplete, becomes more coherent. More clues to its original design and format are exposed, clues that were disguised as long as it was trapped in its modern presentation.

Following a similar study of all surviving panels and a collection of such clues, a regular pattern emerges revealing the original design of the panels which initially composed the Seven Sleepers window. By arranging these panels in groups, the original design of the entire window can be reconstructed (Figure 4). It seems to have comprised a series of undulating medallion shapes formed by the clustered combination of four panels. Those portions of the quadrants that held the figural compositions were defined by three straight sides and a fourth delineated by an asymmetrically disposed curve. Foliate ornament filled the interstices cut by the curving fillets to complete the rectangle, and a triangle of ornament was reserved from the corner of each panel. When the panels were combined in groups of four, these triangles formed a canted square boss that served as an ornamental clasp at the center, binding the clustered design of each medallion. No complete panel exists from the Seven Sleepers window, but each surviving fragment is compatible with this general design which de-

rives from the best preserved example of each motif among what has survived.

A true test of this reconstruction of the design of the Seven Sleepers window, however, resides in the compatibility of the arrangement of the extant panels with the temporal sequence of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, an episode of which is portrayed in each panel. Fortunately, the surviving panels from the Seven Sleepers window can be arranged in chronological narrative order within the design format which I established for the window based on their formal analysis alone. Three registers, containing the "American panels," will be presented here as examples (Figure 4).

Both scenes survive from what was probably the seventh register, numbering from the base of the window (the lowest register in Figure 4). To the left, Malchus attempts to buy food with his old money and, at the right, is brought before the bishop and prefect and accused of its possession. (This panel is one of only two which have retained the inscriptions that once identified most scenes of the window, in this case "*Hic ante presvlem ducitur*"—"Here he is led before the proconsul.") Above this, at the left on the subsequent register, messengers are sent to the emperor Theodosius advising him of the miracle. I have placed another panel at the right on this register to help round out the medallion cluster, but its subject—the lower

Stained glass windows were ostentatious expressions of an age of faith



Figure 5: Malchus, after nearly two centuries' sleep, is led before the Bishop and Prefect of Ephesus. Detail from a panel of the Seven Sleepers window, dating from 1200-02, now in the Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, Pa. (03.SG.51).



Rouen Cathedral as it appears today (above). The John the Baptist window (right), now a part of the Belle Verrière in Figure 2, is the best known work of the creator of the Seven Sleepers windows. The artist's name is unknown.



portion of a group of figures—is too generic to dictate where it actually belonged in the window. On the next register, however, the scene of Theodosius on horseback, traveling to Ephesus, can be placed with certainty.

Without painstaking, tedious, persistent, often controversial research on the part of the art historian, many works of art like this window would remain lost. I have had the space here to present only one window as a case study, but it is my hope that, as my study continues (I next need to manage to have scaffolding erected in front of the window at Rouen), the application of the same method will allow me to recover other seemingly lost windows that once illuminated the aisle of Rouen cathedral, windows whose panels, like those of the Seven Sleepers window, have been partially distributed among American collections and French storerooms.

But some important questions remain to be addressed here. What is, after all, the purpose of this detective work and the reconstructing it allows? Why do art historians involve themselves in such exercise? Why does Swarthmore College give them leaves to do so? For this art historian the answers to such questions lie in the public and private meanings of works of art like the Seven Sleepers window, specifically how those meanings can be drawn from the past and affect the present, and perhaps can be projected into the future.

Many civilizations devoted their best

efforts and attempted to express their most important ideas through visual language. An understanding of this role played by works of art in the past should ideally inspire questions concerning the reduced role of aesthetic values, or even the attempt to deny the value of the visual, within our own culture. In the more eloquent words of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, whose enlightened patronage in the 1140s practically invented the use of the stained glass window as we now know it, "*Praetertorium enim recordatio futurorum est exhibitio*," or in Erwin Panofsky's graceful translation, "The recollection of the past is the promise of the future."³

Stained glass windows were perhaps the most ostentatious, certainly among the most sincere expressions of an age of faith, absolute power, audacity. The Seven Sleepers window, for instance, was created for the Cathedral of Rouen around 1200-1202, just before the culmination of a political crisis in Normandy which would see the allegiances of the province turn rather tumultuously from England to France. The subject of this window, in fact, seems to be directly involved with an expression of English royal and dynastic pretension and may be directly associated with John, King of England, and Walter of Coutances, Archbishop of Rouen. This historical moment, which allied two of the shrewdest politicians of the day, was full of promise, but short-lived. In 1204 Rouen fell to King Philip Augustus of France, and Archbishop Walter and his canons switched their loyalties from the King of England to the King of France.

The subject of the Seven Sleepers, tied to the English royal cult of Edward the Confessor, lost its political appropriateness in 1204. Since it was not discarded, however, it remains not only as a document of political and social transition at the beginning of the 13th century, but also as testament to the significance of the visual arts within Gothic society when kings and archbishops turned to artists to embody the structures of meaning that supported their power.

But even if the subject matter of the Seven Sleepers window is rooted in the concerns of a particular moment, the eloquence of the figures which embody it is not. They speak directly to us, across time, with enduring freshness. At the turn of the 13th century, visual art expressed more than the aspirations of the powerful; it served artists as a potent means of eternalizing interpersonal dialogue. It always has. If we are fortunate, it always will.

Thus if the detective has been successful, his reconstructed window will not seem a simple exercise in cleverness, an attempt, that is, to put together a jigsaw puzzle with-

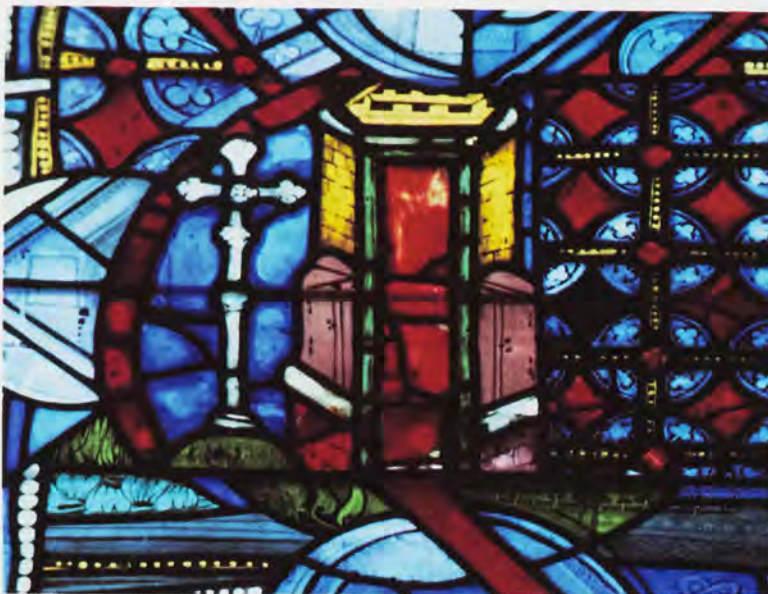
out all the pieces, for idle amusement. The reconstruction of the windows of Rouen is but the vehicle through which to establish contact with the past on both a societal and a personal level, to grasp its fragile primary artifacts before they crumble away, and bring them and the artists who made them back to life by snatching both into the present in a form in which they can be transmitted to the future and never be lost.

To put it another way, if in reading the pictures that accompany these words you encounter for the first time, even for a brief moment, the most exquisite art of the Rouen John the Baptist Master, if, that is, I have coaxed you into a direct confrontation with this artist through a visual dialogue across time and space (Figure 5), the detective will have accomplished his purpose. I hope,

however, that in the course of the dialogue this 13th-century artist will teach you something about the importance of the visual in his, this, and every culture.

End notes

1. The extensive visual and scholarly documentation of my study of this and another window from the Rouen nave aisle is forthcoming in *Gesta*, Vol. XXV/2, 1986, as "The Seven Sleepers and the Seven Kneelers: Prolegomena to a Study of the 'Belles Verrières' of the Cathedral of Rouen." Here I will present only general arguments and conclusions.
2. The 19th-century windows were destroyed with much of the cathedral in a devastating bombing in April of 1944. Today visitors to the cathedral see 20th-century windows in their place.
3. *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky, Second Edition by Gerda Panofsky-Soergel (Princeton, 1979) pp. 52-3.



Contemporary French glass painter Sylvie Gaudin recently created a new stained glass window for Rouen Cathedral by surrounding eight fragments from early 13th-century panels with skillful modern variations on their medieval themes.